CineFiles
University of California
Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive

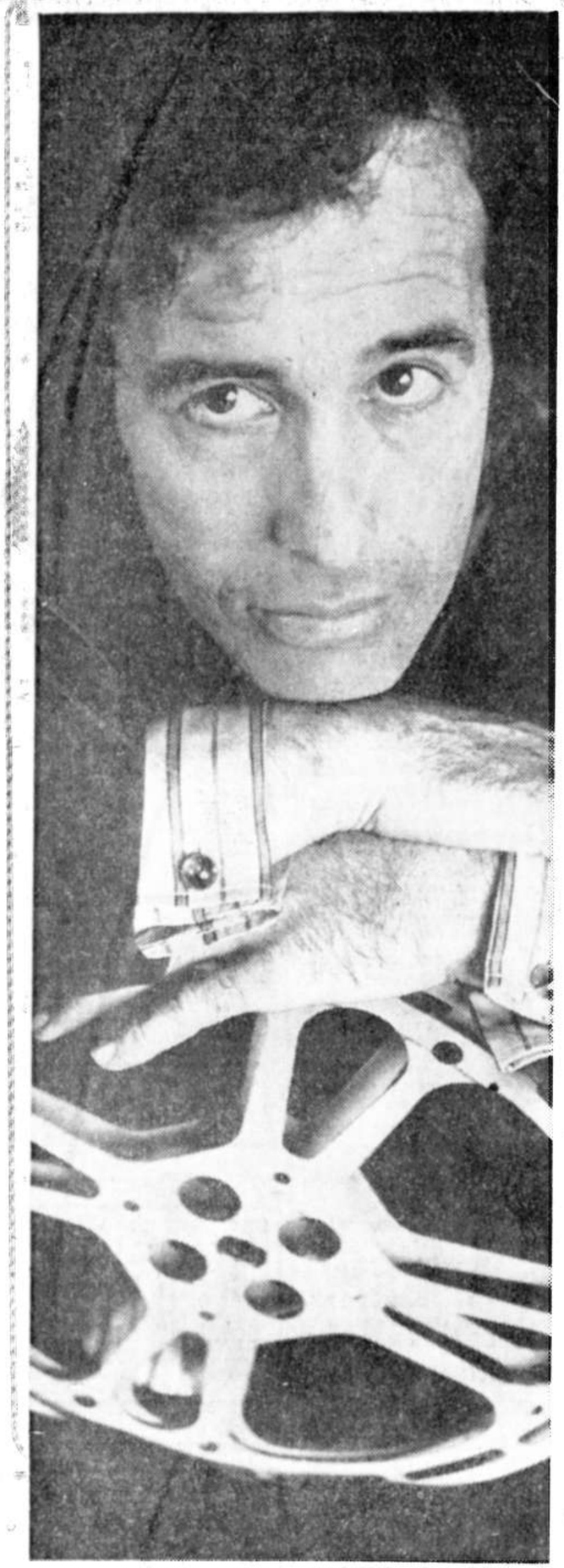
Document Citation

Title	**From underground: Kenneth Anger rising**
Author(s)	Elenore Lester
Source	*New York Times*
Date	1967 Feb 19
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Anger, Kenneth (1927), Santa Monica, California, United States
Film Subjects	

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

From Underground: Kenneth Anger Rising

By ELENORE LESTER



Bob Greene

Kenneth Anger, creator of "Scorpio Rising."

Next: The turned-on children—teeny-boppers and adolescent hippies

WHEN Establishment film critics attack the Underground for sloppy craftsmanship, self-indulgence and perversity-for-perversity's-sake, they usually make an exception of Kenneth Anger's "Scorpio Rising." The 30-minute film, which offers, in phantasmagoric color, a necromantic view of the horrors and charm of the motorcycle set, with its fetishistic leather and chains, its primitive rites and its death-sex-leader syndrome, is considered a classic of the Underground. Appropriately, it became the second Underground film to surface in an uptown movie house when it opened recently at the New Yorker. (Since nobody gets there before Andy Warhol, it was inevitable that Andy's "Chelsea Girls" would make the breakthrough, even though it was made later than "Scorpio Rising.")

Although Anger has been making films independently for more than 20 years, it was not until "Scorpio," which won him a $10,000 Ford Foundation grant, that he became known outside a limited circle of cinéastes. "Scorpio," set to the blasting rock beat of Pop records which satirically counterpoints the mystic affair between cyclists and their cycles, was the first box-office success of the Underground. The film's debut at an old movie house in the deserted City Hall area in February, 1965, drew a crowd that included in-the-groove psychoanalysts, artists and art critics, and a representation of what the inflamed imaginations of news-magazine editorialists see as "the homosexual Mafia" of hairdressers, dress designers and decorators. Almost overnight, display windows of elegant uptown boutiques had wicked motorcycle chains thrown over plush velvet couches, and models in couture dresses, poised between the handlebars of motorcycles, casting enigmatic glances at dangerous-looking drivers. The fad for the motorcycle look got a shot in the arm. Leather and goggles became standard gear for both sexes for doing the galleries on the upper East Side, as well as the bars on the lower West.

All the while Anger himself, a loner, totally unrelated to the swinging New York scene, was busy in California or in Europe doing research for his two consuming passions—magick (he spells it that way for magickal reasons) and filmmaking.

"They are really the same," he said recently when he visited New York en route from London to San Francisco. "Making a movie is like casting a spell." He is active in a small sect called Thelema, founded by Aleister Crowley, an English occultist who died in 1947. Anger refers to the cult as "the present-day embodiment of witchcraft" and an assertion of love and joy over sorrow and sin. He explained that his fascination with magic or fantasy "at the point where it meets reality" is what has led him to study various American cults.

Working on "Scorpio" in 1962, Anger spent every weekend for three months with a Brooklyn motorcycle club. He says he sees the cyclists as comprising a "cult of arrested adolescents," dangerous to themselves rather than others. He says that most of them marry and when their wives become pregnant they get rid of their motorcycles and buy a car. He sees them as cowboys, "the last romantics of this culture," who have traded their horses for bikes.

Violence and Death

However, he equates their underlying love of violence and death with that of the Nazis, and in "Scorpio" he interpolates old film clips showing Hitler and his storm troopers. Scenes from an old movie about Christ and a bit of Marlon Brando in "The Wild One" are also interpolated—to the confusion of many viewers. Anger explains that he was drawing parallels — "I find ridiculous the idea of anyone being The Leader."

At 37, Anger, who started making films at 13 or 14 when he picked up the family's 16 millimeter camera, can look young-rebel-Jimmy-Deanish, posed in black leather against the sleek chrome handlebars of a motorcycle. But unposed, carrying a business-like briefcase crammed with plans for new projects, he looks more like the effective artist who has managed to conceive, finance, direct, write, photograph, edit, hand-tint and even act in several complex and beautiful award-winning films, all of which are involved, at some level, with fantasy.

"I have put all my own money into my films," he said. "I had an inheritance, enough to keep me working, never enough to realize my most ambitious projects. Although I've gotten over it now, there were things I had put so much into and then couldn't carry out—well, it was tragic at the time." Anger said he had spent about $10,000 on "Scorpio."

The work on "Scorpio" led Anger to become more interested in youth cults. "It is in the teen-age cults that magick emerges into the contemporary world," he says. "In California the various teen sub-cultures are very primitive, very ritualistic, each with its own rites. The surfers, for example, develop a sort of nature religion—and the boys look like Vikings with their long sun-bleached hair and their deep tans. Then there are the rock 'n' roll groups—the ones that take LSD before going to dances which are combined with "light shows"—it's like a tribal ceremony. The hot-rod kids are something else. I'm interested mainly in the ones who make their own cars, but there are also the affluent ones who are able to buy their cars. They really live in a dream world. You see, they aren't allowed to drive these cars on the highways. They just constantly work on them. They are in love with the inhuman and, set loose in a technological world, they could become dangerous."

Anger said he had temporarily shelved work on "Kustom Kar Kommandos," the film he had started with the Ford grant, because he had run out of money to complete it as he wanted it. He said he had used K's in the title simply because it is the authentic teen-age spelling—"Their way of excluding adults"—but found it significant that the initials were KKK. Intensely aware of the dangerous aspects of many forms of cultish behavior, Anger recently spent much time in East Germany studying Nazi youth propaganda films and saw how "the children were seduced, first with hiking trips, bands, torchlight parades in Tyrolean costumes, and were given, as rewards, first a badge, then a knife, a dagger and finally a gun."

He feels, however, that on the whole, the current crop of teen-agers are on a "love trip" rather than a "hate trip." He calls them "the love generation — very different from beatnik generation, much more spiritual." He is now working on a feature-length color film about "today's new tribes of teen-agers, turned-on children—teeny-boppers and adolescent hippies." He is calling the film "Lucifer Rising" because "Lucifer is the demon-angel of light and beauty." Anger explained that he uses astrology "poetically rather than literally" in his films and had chosen Scorpio for the motorcyclists because "Scorpio is the house of death and also a sexual sign."

The Color of LSD

Like some members of "the love generation," Anger is interested in LSD. He said he first took it "under highly controlled conditions in Switzerland several years ago" and found that it gave him a heightened awareness of color. He feels that his 39-minute color film, "Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome," is "ideally a psychedelic experience." The film, made in 1956, presents a magical-mythological masquerade party. Anger originally planned it for three screens, but was never satisfied with the way it worked technically and for the past few years it has been shown on a single screen. Recently he decided to change it by superimposing images planned for the additional screens. The new version of "Pleasure Dome," along with Anger's major works over the past 20 years, will soon be presented at the Film-Makers' Cinemathéque.

Anger is very much interested in working on more popular films. One of his ideas is to do a semi-fictional feature-length work showing how people are changed as a result of seeing flying saucers. He says he has seen more than one himself and avidly reads all government reports about sightings. He would also like to make a good teen-age horror film. He feels that Hollywood's recent efforts along these lines are very inferior and that Hollywood itself, once a land of magickal promise, ought now to be "dismantled."

Ironically, Anger made his own first important film, "Fireworks," in Hollywood in 1947. His family was living there at the time and, when his parents went away for the weekend, 17-year-old Kenneth pushed all of the furniture out of the living room and filmed a homosexual fantasy that brought cries of dismay from conservative members of Cinema 16 when Amos Vogel presented it before that pioneering film society in 1949. However, things have moved since that time and "Fireworks" and "Scorpio" were both enthusiastically received at Spencer Memorial Church in Brooklyn four weeks ago.

The world is definitely changing, notes Anger. However, even though the Love Generation is rising, there may be trouble ahead. For the next seven years, while Neptune, the planet of mysticism and idealism, is in the sign of Scorpio, which is not only sexual but very materialistic, there is no telling what might happen. In the larger scheme of things, the Piscean era, which is the age of Christ, has come to an end, and Anger isn't sorry to see it go with its "renunciation, sacrifice and guilt." The Aquarian Age, ruled by the planet Uranus, is taking over, and for the next half century or so the world will be "skinning off the shell left over from the last era and man will become as a child again." He thinks that is one reason for the importance of youth cults today.

Anger sees the current magickal happenings in California as a war of the generations. He believes that the California police "who have set out to control the teen-agers are bound to bring out the worst in them." Although his own political banner is a whimsical one—"reunion with England" — Anger is deeply sympathetic with the college rebels at the University of California. He feels that the Board of Regents, which recently dismissed the university's president, Clark Kerr, represents the old, authoritarian power structure and "has got to go." And they'd better look out. Anger, the magus filmmaker, has ways of hexing enemies.

Feb 19, 1967 NYT

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)